(/)

RELIGION (/ARTICLE-BROWSE?FIELD_SUBJECT_AREA_TID=3)
THEORY (/ARTICLE-BROWSE?FIELD_SUBJECT_AREA_TID=5)

pdf

Emic and etic (https://www.anthr

Culture (/entry-tags/culture)

Language (/entry-tags/language)

Methods (/entry-tags/methods)

Science & Technology (/entry-tags/science-technology)

Till Mostowlansky

The Graduate Institute Geneva

Andrea Rota

University of Bern

Initially published 29 Nov 2020

Cite as: Mostowlansky, Till, and Andrea Rota. (2020) 2023. "Emic and etic". In *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, edited by Felix Stein. Facsimile of the first edition in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Online: http://doi.org/10.29164/20emicetic (http://doi.org/10.29164/20emicetic)

Abstract

The emic/etic *distinction originated in linguistics in the 1950s to designate two complementary standpoints for the analysis of human language and behaviour. It has been subject to debates in the humanities and social sciences ever since. Imported into anthropology in the 1960s,* etic *came to stand for ambitions to establish an objective, scientific approach to the study of culture, whereas* emic *refers to the goal of grasping the world according to one's interlocutors' particular points of view. While the distinction lost traction as an analytical instrument in anthropology in the 1990s,* emic *and* etic *have become concepts used by various other disciplines and subfields in the humanities and social sciences. In these contexts, they continue to be used to address a range of different epistemological and methodological issues, such as the relationship between researcher and research subject or the question of how to legitimately interpret social practices. For this*

reason, the emic/etic *distinction remains relevant. It draws attention to fundamental differences in the way scholars and students of various disciplines approach and discuss research, data, and comparison.*

Introduction

To most students and scholars in the humanities and social sciences, the term *emic* is probably familiar from introductory courses and casual references to the concepts, statements, and interactions of a researcher's interlocutors in ethnographic (http://doi.org/10.29164/18ethno) research. While *emic* has remained in use as part of anthropological jargon, its conceptual counterpart, *etic*, a term often loosely employed to identify a researcher's own analytic framework, has fallen out of fashion. As a result, the historical (http://doi.org/10.29164/21history) development of these counterparts has likewise faded into obscurity. However, twentieth-century thinking on *emic/etic* encapsulates and sheds light on central debates in the humanities and social sciences that retain importance today. The terms are neologisms of the 1950s that were introduced to anthropology from linguistics. They have come to stand for major differences in epistemology, methodology, and theory, for example with regard to materialism, religion, theories of the mind (http://doi.org/10.29164/21mind), and relativistic versus comparative approaches to studying social life.

To understand the contemporary significance of *emic/etic* for the study of culture and society, it is paramount to discuss the distinction's history in anthropology – especially in the period from the 1960s to the early 1990s – as well as its afterlives in various fields in the humanities and social sciences in which the terms are still widely used. This entry's first section, therefore, analyses the emergence of *emic/etic* in the process of interactions between linguists and anthropologists in the 1950s and 1960s. It follows the trajectories of the main protagonists in this process, linguist Kenneth

L. Pike and anthropologist Marvin Harris. The second section turns to the actual contents of the *emic/etic* debate of the late 1980s, which reflect major epistemological differences in the social sciences of the time. Finally, the third section addresses current scholarship in the humanities and social sciences that continues to debate the *emic/etic* distinction.

Beginnings

Categories and approaches addressing issues similar to the *emic/etic* distinction have notable precedents in linguistics and anthropology (e.g. Swadesh 1934; Sapir 1949 [1927]; Malinowski 1944, 1954). However, the introduction and formalization of the concepts *emic/etic* should be credited to the American linguist Kenneth L. Pike. Pike's work was informed by both his academic research at the University of Michigan and his missionary involvement in the Summer Institute of Linguistics, a Christian-based organization specialising in translating the Bible into lesser-known languages (Pike 1962). As a specialist of non-Indo-European languages such as the Mixtec language family, Pike's early career focused on the study of phonetics and phonemics both as objects of theoretical inquiry and as a pragmatic means to research and codify local languages (Pike 1943, 1947).

In linguistics, phonetics is the study of the sounds of human speech (http://doi.org/10.29164/17voice) and their production. One of the aims of phonetics research is to develop a cross-linguistic representation of all sounds found in human languages. For instance, the French word *cher* ('dear' or 'expensive') and the English word *sheep* begin with the same phone, [ʃ]– a voiceless palato–alveolar fricative – according to the notation of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Yet not all phonetic differences are relevant to speakers of any given language in their communication. Drawing on this observation, phonemics aims to reconstruct the implicit or unconscious system of sound contrasts that are employed to

distinguish meaningful utterances in a given language. For instance, /r/ and /l/ are distinct phonemes in English; thus, *rip* and *lip* have different meanings. Conversely, the /r/ in the word *great* will sound quite different when pronounced by a Scotsman or a Londoner, but the meaning of the word will remain the same, which indicates that English speakers perceive the two phonetically distinct sounds as nonetheless the same phoneme.

In the 1950s, Pike became increasingly critical of approaches that considered language a form of human activity essentially distinct from non-linguistic behaviour, and he sought to develop a theoretical and methodological approach that treated '[v]erbal and nonverbal activity as a unified whole' (Pike 1954: 2). An initial step towards this goal was to extend the distinction between phonetics and phonemics to the analysis of all forms of human behaviour. Eliminating the reference to sound units implied by the prefix 'phon-' gave rise to the terms *emic* and *etic*. Pike defined *emic* and *etic* as 'two basic standpoints from which a human observer can describe human behavior, each of them valuable for certain specific purposes' (Pike 1954: 8).

According to Pike, an *etic* approach would rely on a generalised classification system devised by the researcher in advance for the study of any particular culture in order to compare and classify behavioural data from across the world, analogous to the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet to compare the sounds of spoken language. For instance, a researcher might outline a series of formal criteria to distinguish among different types of speech acts, such as statements, orders, and promises. Such an *etic* taxonomy could then be employed to compare the use of these distinct functions of language in different settings (see Reiss 1985).

Conversely, following Pike, an *emic* approach would dispense with *a priori* means of classification. Focusing on one culture at a time, its goal would be to discover and describe the structured patterns of mental and bodily activities that the members of that culture, consciously or unconsciously, regard as distinct and significant for

their system of behaviour. Thus, an *emic* approach would call attention to the fact that two *etically* idential behaviours can in fact differ profoundly, depending on the meaning and purpose of the actors. To illustrate this, Pike employed the example of two identical statements on the Parliament floor, one of which could serve to promote a piece of legislation, the other to filibuster it, depending on the intentions of the speaker (1954: 13). Another example is the killing of a fly, which may be a trivial gesture in one place, but may have deeper moral (http://doi.org/10.29164/17ethics) implications in others. Pike thus emphasised that *emic* and *etic* standpoints should be regarded as two elements of a stereoscopic image – one that combines two points of view on the same data to represent its object (Kassam & Bashuna 2004: 209-12; Pike 1954: 12). Yet, for Pike, the *emic* standpoint provided deeper insight into a particular culture because it helps scholars understand the attitudes, motives, and interests of social actors within the context of their cultural wholes.

Pike's discussion of the *emic/etic* distinction was just the starting point for the development of *tagmemics*, a complex system of grammatical analysis devoted to the study of the basic units of language (Pike 1982; Hahn 2005). Within the social sciences, however, the transmission of Pike's ideas was largely limited to the core terms *emic/etic*, which found their way into anthropology at least a decade after Pike had coined them (Headland 1990: 15) and became increasingly popular in anthropological publications from the 1960s to the 1980s (e.g. Berger *et al.* 1976; Durbin 1972; Levi-Strauss 1972; Feleppa 1986). During this period, the lines of transmission led in two directions: a transmission of the concepts *emic/etic* from linguistics (in the spirit of Kenneth Pike) directly into anthropological studies (e.g. Dundes 1962); and a different trajectory for the terms, which were popularised through the continuously-evolving work of Marvin Harris.

In 1964, Harris, then at Columbia University, published his first major work, *The nature of cultural things*, in which he refers to Pike and the *emic/etic* distinction. This book served as an early entry point for the

concepts into anthropology. In 1968, Harris published *The rise of anthropological theory*, which remains one of the most cited histories (http://doi.org/10.29164/21history) of the development of anthropological thought. Harris's history, covering a plethora of anthropological debates from nineteenth-century evolutionism to French structuralism to British social anthropology, ends in the 1960s with a theory – cultural materialism – which he himself coined and which he propagated as a means to return to anthropology's 'scientific (http://doi.org/10.29164/16science)' aspirations. Cultural materialism is based on the assumption that 'human social life is a response to the practical problems of earthly existence' (Harris 1979: ix), and, drawing on Marxian, evolutionary, and ecological ideas, sought to uncover the material – that is, economic, biological, environmental – determinants of sociocultural phenomena. Harris thereby argued for a focus on the 'objective' causes of human behaviour and defended a view of anthropology as a universal science of society devoted to the formulation of general, explanatory, and testable theories (Harris 1979; 1994).

In the proclamation of cultural materialism, Harris tried to build a case against the New Ethnography and ethnoscience movements (Sturtevant 1964) of the same period, which propagated the *emic* study of cognition and language to examine how different cultures perceive and interact with their environments. Harris particularly criticised the unreflective borrowing of concepts from linguistics, including Pike's *emic* and *etic*. In this process, he also introduced his own, critical reinterpretation of *emic/etic* as part of the epistemological framework of cultural materialism.

In *The rise of anthropological theory*, the *emic/etic* distinction served to differentiate between what Harris called 'cultural idealism' and 'cultural materialism' in 'an age dedicated to eclectic middle-ground theories' (1968: 569). With the term 'cultural idealism', Harris (1968: 568) was hinting at a broad spectrum of misguided anthropological approaches – 'accumulated liabilities of the past two hundred years' – that aim to explore informants' mental states and motivations.

According to Harris (1968: 576), this *emic* strand of theory, including the work of his contemporary, Claude Lévi-Strauss, failed to recognise the methodological dilemma that derives from the fact that 'the ethnographer teaches the informant how to teach the ethnographer to think in appropriate *emic* terms'. In contrast, Harris fervently promoted an *etic* approach as the foundation of cultural materialism and a way out of anthropology's increasing scientific irrelevance. By *etic*, Harris meant statements and categories that receive confirmation from other scientists, but not necessarily from informants. *Etics* thus allowed anthropologists to develop their arguments on the basis of scientific frameworks that are rooted in assumedly objective social processes and relations (http://doi.org/10.29164/18relations). This would eventually render anthropology 'the science of culture'.

Harris's research programme – further clarified in his widely referenced 1979 book *Cultural materialism: the struggle for a science of culture* – built on Marx and a range of other positivistic thinkers to emphasise societal infrastructure (http://doi.org/10.29164/23infrastructure), structure, and superstructure as determinants of culture (Kuznar & Sanderson 2007: 4). In *Cultural materialism*, as well as in much later work leading up to Harris's final monograph, *Theories of culture in postmodern times* (1999), the distinction between *emic* and *etic* served to shed light on the difference between social scientists who analyse their informants' interpretations of events (*emic*) and those who weigh such interpretations against the forces of economy, ecology, and technology (*etic*). Harris discussed this distinction using, for instance, his research on 'bovicide' in southern India (1979: 32). This research juxtaposed farmers (http://doi.org/10.29164/20farming)' statements that all calves – male and female – were treated and fed equally with statistical data that showed that male calves were significantly more likely to die. In a context in which the Hindu prohibition against bovine slaughter was dominant but in which there was no use for male traction animals (http://doi.org/10.29164/19anim), Harris argued that the starving

and neglect of male calves was *emically* rationalised as 'males being weaker'. However, from an *etic* perspective, local economic and ecological conditions led farmers to actively cull male calves by pulling them from their mothers' teats.

The *emic/etic* debate

From the 1960s to the 1980s, many anthropologists took up *emic/etic*, either as a way to position themselves epistemologically or simply to indicate alignment with a major strand of anthropological theory. However, no scholar employed the terms as pointedly and deliberately as Marvin Harris did to promote his own theory – cultural materialism – over such a long period of time. We can thus look at Harris as a node in anthropological discussions on the *emic/etic* distinction. Such discussions first took place in academic journals (e.g. Harris 1976) and then in person in 1988 when Pike and Harris were part of an invited panel at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Phoenix, Arizona. In front of an audience of an estimated six hundred anthropologists, the two protagonists of the decades-long intellectual debate encountered each other.

In his introduction to the collected papers presented at the symposium, Thomas Headland (1990), who was responsible for organising the event, called attention to the rising popularity of *emic/etic* beyond the field of anthropology. During the 1970s, the terms had not only spread to other social sciences, but had also found their way into English dictionaries. Yet, unsurprisingly, the dissemination of the concepts in various fields had led to growing confusion regarding their scholarly definitions. Depending on the academic context, the *emic/etic* distinction was used synonymously with verbal/nonverbal, specific/universal, description/theory, and in many other ways. Although Headland considered most of these imaginative interpretations to be inaccurate, he acknowledged that they had been heuristically useful in various disciplines and that the

extension of the original meaning was therefore legitimate. He also argued that such latitude could prove detrimental to the field of anthropology. A conceptual clarification therefore seemed in order. This, however, proved to be a complex task. As various examples illustrate, what emerged from the debate was less a coherent view of the *emic/etic* distinction than an interconnected inventory of contested epistemological issues.

Pike and Harris accepted that their uses and understandings of *emic/etic* diverged from one another. More importantly, however, they used *emic/etic* in the service of distinct scientific (http://doi.org/10.29164/16science) paradigms. Defending a Kantian perspective, Pike portrayed thinking, imagining, and speaking as ways of relating the individual to the world that are inevitably mediated by the 'emic structures' of a culture (Pike 1990a: 34). As he suggested in one example, it is only by availing themselves of those cultural categories that the members of a family can say that they are not merely eating together in the morning, but are having breakfast (Pike 1990a: 39-40).

In his opinion, the main task of the researcher was to reconstruct the unexpressed 'emic knowledge' that guides human behaviour. *Etic* concepts were to provide a helpful steppingstone towards this goal – just as a phonetic analysis provided an entry point to decoding an unknown language (Pike 1990b: 64-5; Pike 1954: 11). Harris, on the other hand, championed a neo-behaviourist perspective and vehemently opposed the anthropological 'dogma' that identified the 'distinctively human capacity for expectations, intentions, and ideas' as the key to explaining human behaviour (Harris 1990a: 55). According to his approach, an analysis employing *etic* categories was not only a goal in itself, but was in fact essential if one is to account for emergent social phenomena that were not consciously or individually intended.

Pushing this argument further, Harris objected to Pike's view that thinking, imagining, and speaking are kinds of 'emic behavior' (Harris 1990b: 78), insisting that the terms *emic* and *etic* were not meant to

demarcate particular types of behaviour (for instance, mental events versus bodily movements). Rather, they referred to separate modes of description the researched used – Pike had actually emphasised himself in his early works. In Harris's opinion, the advantage of *emic/etic* over similar binary modes of description such as subjective/objective or insider/outsider derives precisely from its inherent epistemological focus. For instance, participants and observers can both be subjective and objective in their descriptions and analyses. However, 'the discrimination between emic and etic modes depends strictly on the operations employed by the observers' (Harris 1990a: 50). In this epistemological understanding of the terms, Harris underscored that the validity of scientific results ultimately depends on the consensus of the community of observers, independent of the distinctions that the actors themselves consider appropriate (Harris 1990b: 78). *Etic* categories are regarded as scientifically sound when they allow for the discovery of objective social patterns and the production of general and verifiable knowledge, and not because they apprehend some subjective account of the world. As Harris put it, *etic* analyses 'stand or fall on their contribution to predictive or retrodictive nomothetic theories about the evolution of sociocultural differences and similarities' (Harris 1990: 53-4).

This argument revealed an even more profound fault line. For Pike, scholars themselves were 'creatures of their scientifically and naturally categorized linguistic environment' who may not recognize the 'local' or culture-specific nature of their own point of view (1990b: 68). This implied that the *etic* categories devised by the scholars had no special status, but amounted to nothing more than the *emic* perspective of a scientific community (Pike 1954: 9). This idea questioned the very possibility of a cross-cultural 'scientific' anthropology as postulated by Harris. Harris thus warned that if all scientific concepts were regarded as plain *emic* constructs, 'the very notion of etics would have to be abandoned along with all hope of achieving a science of human social life' (Harris 1990b: 79). Harris insisted that the *emics* of the scientific community were of a special

kind because of their unique responsiveness 'to the task of building a diachronic, synchronic, comparative, and global science of society and culture' (1990a: 49). It is this fundamental distinction that, in Harris's opinion, granted scientific statements the separate category of *etics*.

Despite the fact that the Pike–Harris debate happened in the context of a large-scale gathering of anthropologists, it appeared to be the end rather than the beginning of a focused engagement with *emic/etic* in anthropology. The reasons for this are complex and vary according to local contexts (and this entry can only cover anthropological research published in English as the main site of the *emic/etic* debate). For instance, Harris, who continued to be the main promoter of *emic/etic* in anthropology in the context of cultural materialism, remained outside the period's dominant debates, and his contemporary work was – if acknowledged at all – referenced to distinguish critical approaches from old-fashioned ones, with his being considered old-fashioned and not sufficiently reflexive (e.g. Marcus & Fischer 1999 [1986]: 111).

Furthermore, the significant influence of postcolonial (http://doi.org/10.29164/16colonialism) studies and poststructuralism on anthropology in the 1980s and 1990s contributed to a turn away from aspirations to conduct cross-cultural analysis and achieve scientific objectivity – or *etics* – that had been an integral part of cultural materialism. At the same time, the temporary decline in interest in Marxian historical materialism that came with the end of the Cold War assured that cultural materialism – and thereby Harris's take on *emic/etic* – were laid to rest. In his late work, and most explicitly in the essay 'Cultural materialism is alive and well and won't go away until something better comes along', Harris sought to defend his positivistic stance against the constructivist position of feminist theory and the deconstructive approaches of Derrida and Foucault (1994: 74). In Harris's opinion,

the relativism inherent in these paradigms led down a dangerous path towards the rejection of scientific truth and, ultimately, to fascism.

It is against this backdrop that we can understand the receding interest in *emic/etic* as a heuristic instrument in anthropology. While discussions around *emic/etic* occasionally resurface (e.g. Ginzburg 2017; Sahlins 2017), they often do so in the form of footnotes and do not seem to affect larger theoretical debates. Although anthropologists continue to employ the term *emic* to broadly refer to an interlocutor's standpoint as well as collective 'local' practices and perspectives (e.g. Beyer 2016: xix; Her 2018; Knauft 2019), it has lost its analytical significance. Similarly, the epistemological and theoretical arguments related to the term *etic* have lost traction or appear using other terms, for instance in relation to universal cognitive constraints as foundations for cross-cultural comparison (e.g. Whitehouse 2004) or in debates concerning cultural and ontological (http://doi.org/10.29164/17ontology) difference (Heywood 2017). Meanwhile, *emic/etic* have emerged in other fields of the humanities and social sciences. The following section discusses selected examples, some of which have fed back into on-going anthropological debates.

Afterlives: language, infrastructure, and religion

In linguistics, Pike's legacy lives on through the numerous scholars he trained to analyse unwritten languages, in particular in his capacity as director of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) (Wise, Headland & Brend 2001). His original approach to the study of language and behaviour, however, succumbed to the paradigm shift within linguistics towards Noam Chomsky's theory of transformational grammar (Headland 2001). Yet, one of Pike's students, the anthropologist and former SIL missionary Daniel Everett, has recently revived the conceptual reflection on the *emics* of culture at the intersection of linguistics and anthropology.

Everett's discussion of the implications of an *emic* perspective is set against the backdrop of a widely publicised scientific (http://doi.org/10.29164/16science) dispute between him and Chomsky (Everett 2005; Colapinto 2007; Wolfe 2016). Drawing on his analysis of the language spoken by the Pirahã people of Amazonia, Everett questions Chomsky's thesis of a universal grammar shared by all of humankind and insists on the role of culture in shaping underlying linguistic structures. Developing this argument further, Everett (2007, 2016) criticises the nativist tradition in Western philosophy that, from Plato to Chomsky, postulates a psychic unity of mankind on the grounds of shared innate concepts. In contrast, Everett situates his work in a lineage that extends from Aristotle to Michael Polanyi and emphasises personal experiences and appreciations as the sources of tacit forms of knowledge. Within this framework, Everett deploys the concept of *emicization* (citing Pike 1967) to characterise the individual internalization of a number of ineffable or unspoken background premises and know-how that constitute a culturally specific 'insider point of view' and ground our understanding of the 'self' (Everett 2016: 18).

Everett does not conceive of culture as a concrete, static entity that individuals appropriate, but rather as an 'abstract network shaping and connecting social roles, hierarchically structured knowledge domains, and ranked values' (2016: 79). For Everett, culture resides exclusively in the minds (http://doi.org/10.29164/21mind) of individuals. Thus, the unity of a culture and the power of culture to influence thoughts and behaviours are not determined at a social level, but rather emerge from the overlapping backgrounds of individuals who share similar – although never identical – experiences in a local context. For Everett, *emicization* is the process that leads, consciously or unconsciously, from objective experience to the formation of a common subjective appreciation of the world (2016: 116). Therefore, in his opinion, *emicization* constitutes the answer to one of the fundamental anthropological questions: 'How is culture even possible?' (Everett 2016: 116).

As noted earlier, the rise of new trends in anthropology at the end of the twentieth century largely prevented the transmission of Harris's theoretical reflections on the *emic/etic* distinction to a broader audience of scholars. More recent anthropological studies on infrastructure (http://doi.org/10.29164/23infrastructure) (e.g. Appel, Anand & Gupta 2018; Dalakoglou 2017) have once again critically engaged with the legacy of cultural materialism and the claims it developed with respect to the determining force of infrastructure vis-à-vis sociocultural and political processes. For instance, in his study of a highway from Albania to Greece, Dimitris Dalakoglou (2017) observes that early anthropological approaches to infrastructure, such as Harris's (1968), hindered broader ethnographic (http://doi.org/10.29164/18ethno) exploration through their static, deterministic frameworks. Dalakoglou argues that Harris's cultural materialism lacked 'the necessary departure from the Marxist grand narrative toward ethnographic particularity and then back to theory [...] in concrete and organized ways' (2017:11). From a Marxian, positivistic perspective, which Harris largely followed, 'ontological diversity among the various dimensions of an infrastructure (e.g. the sociocultural, material, historical)' is replaced by a broad, overarching category of infrastructure that determines everything else. An *etic* analysis of the sort championed by Harris was, therefore, expected to focus on universal infrastructural processes underlying specific cultures.

It is precisely this much-criticised aspect of cultural materialism that has led anthropologists of infrastructure, and contemporary scholars of materiality more generally (Coole & Frost 2010; Ellenzweig & Zammito 2017), to turn to Science and Technology Studies (STS) and their take on infrastructure as a product of human/non-human interaction. In the kind of materialism proposed early on by scholars of STS such as Bruno Latour (1987, 2005) and Langdon Winner (1989), infrastructures are not a universal or otherwise objective category. Rather, they are part and parcel of sociocultural practices and therefore shaped by class, race (http://doi.org/10.29164/23raceandracism), and relations

(http://doi.org/10.29164/18relations) of power at different scales – as demonstrated, for instance, in Stephanie Tam's (2013) study of caste relations and regimes of purity in Ahmedabad's sewage system since the time of its construction in colonial (http://doi.org/10.29164/16colonialism) India. In this framework, the idea of infrastructure is fundamentally opposed to pre-conceived dichotomies, including epistemological distinctions between mobile/static, subject/object, and *emic/etic*.

As these examples indicate, in its more recent uses the *emic/etic* distinction tends to accompany disciplinary debates in various (sub-)disciplines. The study of religion offers a last telling example. The importation of *emic/etic* and similar distinctions into the study of religion has been largely mediated through the work of Clifford Geertz (e.g. 1966, 1974; see A. Geertz 1997). Since the 1960s, Geertz's work on religion has provided essential resources to move this discipline away from its original phenomenological (http://doi.org/10.29164/21phenomenology) concerns with the nature and manifestations of a distinct sacred reality to framing religion as a social and cultural domain of human thought and activity (Wiebe 1984; Gladigow 2005). During this long – and to some extent still on-going – process, the *emic/etic* distinction became intertwined with contentious methodological and epistemological issues concerning the alleged special status of religious 'insiders', as opposed to academic 'outsiders'. At the heart of the controversy lay the question of whether or not religious 'insiders' have privileged access to and understanding of religious matters.

From a methodological point of view, the debate has raised the question of how scholars determine who counts as a religious insider and whether it is possible or necessary for outsiders to acquire such a status if they are to credibly analyse religious phenomena. Recent scholarship questions the validity of the insider/outsider dichotomy as a way to assess the status of an individual with respect to a religious tradition or community. In this regard, George Chryssides and Stephen Gregg (2019: vii) point out

that '[t]here are not merely insiders and outsiders, but a whole range of positions that those who belong or do not belong to religious communities find themselves in'. Accordingly, they underscore the importance of 'acknowledging different modes of accepting and rejecting various forms of religious life'.

From an epistemological point of view, the insider/outsider debate in the study of religion highlights significant differences between scholars. On the one hand, there are those who frame religion as a *sui generis* phenomenon; that is, as a separate reality the appreciation of which would necessitate a form of 'religious insight' that only 'insiders' could possibly bring to bear. On the other hand, there are scholars who defend the possibility of studying religion by means of sociological, anthropological, and psychological approaches (Mostowlansky & Rota 2016). In this context, various authors have criticised the idea that religion necessitates a special mode of knowing as a normative stance and as a political move in a struggle for (academic) influence (Wiebe 1999; McCutcheon 1997; Jensen 2011).

Russell McCutcheon's (1999) volume *The insider/outsider problem in the study of religion* constitutes an important node in this debate, but also contributed to the conflation of *emic* with 'insider' and *etic* with 'outsider'. One way to disentangle these dimensions at the epistemic level is to employ Niklas Luhmann's (2000) distinction between first- and second-order observers (Mostowlansky & Rota 2016). According to this distinction, first-order observers appreciate the world according to a specific perspective. However, they are not reflexively aware of the fact that their point of view is contextually situated. Religious insiders can be equated to first-order observers who relate to the world on the basis of their religious convictions – for instance, the way they conceive of God or the sacred. Second-order observers, on the other hand, examine how first-order observers observe; that is, they appreciate the perspectival character of first-order observations and explore how and why first-order observers uphold a certain perspective. Academics can also be first-

order observers, just as religious practitioners can reflexively assume the position of second-order observers. But *emic* and *etic* are not synonymous with first- and second-order observations. Rather, *emic* and *etic* analyses are *both* the product of second-order observers, although they imply different standpoints. In sum, as Steven Sutcliffe points out, *emic* and *etic* address 'the question of *how*, rather than *by whom*, the object of knowledge is constructed' (2019: 30, emphasis in original). In the study of religion, *emic* approaches are favoured by, for instance, scholars in the tradition of critical theory who focus on empirical uses of the term 'religion' as an instrument to categorise and control certain aspects of the world (Bergunder 2014). Conversely, examples of *etic* perspectives can be found in the burgeoning field of the cognitive science of religion, which draws on cognitive, ecological, and evolutionary theories to explain the universality of human beliefs and practices associated with religion (Pyysiäinen 2013).

Conclusion

The historic significance of the *emic/etic* distinction in anthropology is twofold. The terms *emic* and *etic* have provided scholars with a vocabulary that directs the attention of their audience towards important issues of analytical perspective, standpoint, and positionality without having to articulate them in detail. In the case of *emic*, many anthropologists have employed the term intuitively to point to their interlocutors' standpoints. While the term *etic* has largely disappeared with the decline of Marvin Harris's cultural materialism, similar issues are raised in debates on comparative approaches. What is more, debates surrounding the *emic/etic* distinction themselves constitute a fruitful object of study in that they provide important insights into the development of anthropological theory over more than six decades.

The explicit theoretical relevance of the *emic/etic* distinction has progressively faded in anthropology since the 1990s. Yet in other disciplines, the terms have been used in a multiplicity of dimensions and sub-debates. As a result, they do not have a clear definition today. Rather, *emic/etic* are continuously appropriated and reinterpreted in various fields of the humanities and social sciences, often to express a range of ontological (http://doi.org/10.29164/17ontology), epistemological, and methodological standpoints. These fields include – in addition to the ones discussed above – cross-cultural psychology (e.g. Eckensberger 2015), history (http://doi.org/10.29164/21history) (e.g. Ginzburg 2013), and management studies (e.g. Buckley 2014). One way to think about the *emic/etic* distinction, then, is that it consists of two adaptable concepts that scholars employ to address issues salient in their disciplines. As such, they are part of on-going struggles between the quest for objectivity and the acknowledgment of its potential elusiveness.

References

Appel, H., N. Anand & A. Gupta 2018. Temporality, politics, and the promise of infrastructure. In *The promise of infrastructure* (eds) N. Anand, A. Gupta & H. Appel, 1-38. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Berger, A.H., M.E.F. Bloch, A. de Ruijter, I.C Jarvie, J. O'Neill, I. Rossi, M. Sahlins, W.W. Stein & A.C.L. Zwaan 1976. Structural and eclectic revisions of Marxist strategy: a cultural materialist critique [and Comments and Reply]. *Current Anthropology* **17**(2), 290-305.

Bergunder, M. 2014. What is religion? The unexplained subject matter of religious studies. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* **26**(3), 246-86.

Beyer, J. 2016. *The force of custom: law and the ordering of everyday life in Kyrgyzstan*. Pittsburgh: University Press.

Buckley, P.J. *et al.* 2015. A linguistic and philosophical analysis of emic and etic and their use in international business research. *Management International Review* **54**, 307-24.

Chryssides, G.D. & S.E. Gregg (eds.) 2019. *The insider/outsider debate: new perspectives in the study of religion*. Sheffield: Equinox.

Colapinto, J. 2007. The interpreter: has a remote Amazonian tribe upended our understanding of language? (9 April). *The New Yorker*.

Coole, D. & S. Frost (eds) 2010. *New materialisms: ontology, agency, and politics*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Dalakoglou, D. 2017. *The road: an ethnography of im(mobility), space, and cross-border infrastructures in the Balkans*. Manchester: University Press.

Dundes, A. 1962. From etic to emic units in the structural study of folktales. *The Journal of American Folklore* **75**(296), 95-105.

Durbin, M.A. 1972. Linguistic models in anthropology. *Annual Review of Anthropology* **1**, 382-410.

Eckensberger, L.H. 2015. Integrating the emic (indigenous) with the etic (universal): a case of squaring the circle or for adopting a culture inclusive action theory perspective. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* **45**(1), 108-40.

Ellenzweig, S. & J.H. Zammito (eds) 2017. *The new politics of materialism: history, philosophy, science*. London: Routledge.

Everett, D. 2005. Cultural constraints on grammar and cognition in Pirahã: another look at the design features of human language. *Current Anthropology* **46**(4), 621-46.

−−−−− 2007. *Language: the cultural tool*. New York: Vintage.

−−−−− 2016. *Dark matters of the mind*: *the culturally articulated unconscious*. Chicago: University Press.

Feleppa, R. 1986. Emics, etics and social objectivity. *Current Anthropology* **27**(3), 243-55.

Geertz, A. 1997. Hermeneutics in ethnography: lessons for the study of religion. In *Vergleichen und Verstehen in der Religionswissenschaft* (ed.) H.-J. Klimkeit, 53-70. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.

Geertz, C. 1966. Religion as a cultural system. In *Anthropological approaches to the study of religion* (ed.) M. Banton, 1-46. London: Tavistock Publications.

––––– 1974. 'From the native's point of view': on the nature of anthropological understanding. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* **28**(1), 26-45.

Gladigow, B. 2005. *Religionswissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.

Ginzburg, C. 2013. Our words, and theirs: a reflection on the historian's craft, today. *Cromohs Cyber Review of Modern Historiography* **18**, 97-114.

––––– 2017. On dichotomies. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* **7**(2), 139-42.

Hahn, C. 2005. *Innensichten, Aussensichten, Einsichten: eine Rekonstruktion der Emic-Etic-Debatte*. Aachen: Shaker.

Harris, M. 1964. *The nature of cultural things*. New York: Random House.

––––– 1968. *The rise of anthropological theory: a history of theories of culture*. New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell, 329-50.

––––– 1976. History and significance of the emic/etic distinction. *Annual Review of Anthropology* **5**, 329-50

––––– 1979. *Cultural materialism: the struggle for a science of culture*. New York: Random House.

−−−−− 1990a. Emics and etics revisited. In *Emics and etics: the insider/outsider debate* (eds) T.N. Headland, K.L. Pike & M. Harris, 48-61. Newbury Park: Sage.

−−−−− 1990b. Harris reply to Pike. In *Emics and etics: the insider/outsider debate* (eds) T.N. Headland, K.L. Pike & M. Harris, 75-83. Newbury Park: Sage.

−−−−− 1994. Cultural materialism is alive and well and won't go away until something better comes along. In *Assessing cultural anthropology* (ed.) R. Borofsky, 62-75. New York: McGraw Hill.

−−−−− 1999. *Theories of culture in postmodern times*. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.

Her, V. 2018. Reframing Hmong religion: a reflection on emic meanings and etic labels. *Amerasia Journal* **44**(2), 23-41.

Heywood, P. 2017. The ontological turn. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (available on-line: http://doi.org/10.29164/17ontology).

Headland, T.N. 1990. Introduction: a dialogue between Kenneth Pike and Marvin Harris on emics and etics. In *Emics and etics: the insider/outsider debate* (eds) T.N. Headland, K.L. Pike & M. Harris, 13-27. Newbury Park: Sage.

−−−−− 2001. Kenneth Lee Pike (1912–2000). *American Anthropologist* **103**(2), 505-09.

Jensen, J.S. 2011. Revisiting the insider–outsider debate: dismantling a pseudo-problem in the study of religion. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* **23**(1), 29-47.

Kassam, A. & A.B. Bashuna 2004. Marginalisation of the Waata Oromo hunter-gatherers of Kenya: insider and outsider perspectives. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* **74**(2), 194-216.

Knauft, B. 2019. Good anthropology in dark times: critical appraisal and ethnographic application. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* **30**(1), 3-17.

Kuznar, L.A. & S.K. Sanderson 2007. Introduction: the potentials and challenges of cultural materialism. In *Studying societies and cultures: Marvin Harris' cultural materialism and its legacy* (eds) L.A. Kuznar & S.K. Sanderson, 1-17. Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm Publishers.

Latour, B. 1987. *Science in action: how to follow scientists and engineers through society*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

−−−−− 2005. *Reassembling the social: an introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford: University Press.

Levi-Strauss, C. 1972. Structuralism and ecology. *Social Sciences Information* **12**(1), 7-23.

Luhmann, N. 2000. *Art as a social system*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Malinowski, B. 1944. *A scientific theory of culture and other essays*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press.

−−−−− 1954. *Magic, science and religion, and other essays*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.

Marcus, G.E. & M.M.J. Fischer 1999 [1986]. *Anthropology as cultural critique: an experimental moment in the human sciences*. Chicago: University Press.

McCutcheon, R.T. (ed.) 1999. *The insider/outsider problem in the study of religion: a reader*. London: Cassell.

McCutcheon, R.T. 1997. *Manufacturing religion: the discourse on sui generis religion and the politics of nostalgia*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mostowlansky, T. & A. Rota 2016. A matter of perspective? Disentangling the emic−etic debate in the scientific study of religion\s. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* **28**(4/5), 317-36.

Pike, K.L. 1943. *Phonetics: a critical analysis of phonetic theory and a technique for the practical description of sounds*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

−−−−− 1947. *Phonemic: a technique for reducing languages to writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

−−−−− 1954. *Language in relation to a unified theory of the structure of human behavior, part 1*. Glendale, Calif.: Summer Institute of Linguistics.

−−−−− 1962. *With heart and mind: a personal synthesis of scholarship and devotion*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans.

−−−−− 1967. *Language in relation to a unified theory of the structure of human behavior*. 2nd ed. The Hague: Mouton.

−−−−− 1982. *Linguistic concepts: an introduction to tagmemics*. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press

−−−−− 1990a. On the emics and etics of Pike and Harrris. In *Emics and etics: the insider/outsider debate* (eds) T. Headland, K.L. Pike & M. Harris, 28-47. Newbury Park: Sage.

−−−−− 1990b. Pike's reply to Harris. In *Emics and etics: the insider/outsider debate* (eds) T. Headland, K.L. Pike & M. Harris, 62-74. Newbury Park: Sage.

Pyysiäinen, I. 2013. Cognitive science of religion: state-of-the-art. *Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion* **1**(1), 5-28.

Reiss, N. 1985. *Speech act taxonomy as a tool for ethnographic description: an analysis based on videotapes of continuous behavior in two New York households*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Sahlins, M. 2017. In anthropology it's emic all the way down. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* **7**(2), 157-63.

Sapir, E. 1949 [1927]. The unconscious paterning of behavior in society. In *Selected writings of Edward Sapir in language, culture and personality* (ed.) D.G. Mandelbaum, 544-59. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sutcliffe, S.J. 2019. The emics and etics of religion: what we know, how we know it and why this matters. In *The insider outsider debate: new perspectives in the study of religion* (eds) G.D. Chryssides & S.E. Gregg, 30-59. Sheffield: Equinox.

Sturtevant, W.C. 1964. Studies in ethnoscience. *American Anthropologist* **66**(2), 99-131.

Swadesh, M. 1934. The phonemic principle. *Language* **10**, 117-29.

Tam, S. 2013. Sewerage's reproduction of caste: the politics of coprology in Ahmedabad, India. *Radical History Review* **116**, 5-30.

Wiebe, D. 1984. The failure of nerve in the academic study of religion. *Studies in Religion* **13**(3), 401-22.

−−−−− 1999. *The politics of religious studies: the continuing conflict with theology in the academy*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Winner, L. 1989. *The whale and the reactor: a search for limits in the age of high technology*. Chicago: University Press.

Wise, M.R., T.N. Headland & R.M. Brend (eds) 2001. *Language and life: essays in memory of Kenneth L. Pike*. Dallas: SIL International Publications in Linguistics.

Whitehouse, H. 2004. *Modes of religiosity: a cognitive theory of religious transmission*. Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press

Wolfe, T. 2016. *The kingdom of speech*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

Note on contributors

Till Mostowlansky is a social anthropologist whose research interests include mobility, materiality, and religion as well as diverse practices of 'doing good' (e.g. development, charity, humanitarianism and philanthropy). He is author of *Azan on the moon: entangling modernity along Tajikistan's Pamir Highway* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017). His current project focusses on Muslim humanitarianism in the borderlands of Central and South Asia.

Department of Anthropology and Sociology, The Graduate Institute Geneva, Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2A, P.O. Box 1672, 1211 Geneva 1, Switzerland. till.mostowlansky@graduateinstitute.ch

Andrea Rota is Assistant Professor at the Institute for the Science of Religion and director of the doctoral program "Global Studies" at the University of Bern. Previously, he held research and teaching positions at the Universities of Bayreuth, Fribourg, and Zurich. His work focuses on philosophical and sociological theories of religion, the entanglement of religion and science in the Long Sixties, and religious education.

Institute for the Science of Religion, University of Bern, Lerchenweg 36, 3012 Bern, Switzerland. andrea.rota@relwi.unibe.ch

If you liked what you just read

The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology is an open access resource. Please help us keep it that way by making a one-time or a regular donation.

Support the encyclopeadia (/about/support)

S H A R E

(/#facebook) (/#twitter) (/#linkedin) (/#email) (https://www.addtoany.c
and-
etic&title=Emic%20and%

T O P

Website © 2024 Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology.
All entries are copyright of the authors and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
ISSN 2398-516X (https://portal.issn.org/resource/ISSN/2398-516X)